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ACCOMMODATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE HARD OF HEARING: PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYEES

Dayl Scherich & Randolph L. Mowry

Abstract

This report describes survey results which highlight current practices in the provision of workplace accommodations for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. Results show that situations considered the most difficult for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing are group or multi-speaker situations. However, the majority of accommodations requested and in use are more appropriate for one-on-one situations. Because respondents identified a limited number of accommodations in use in the workplace, it is felt that perhaps employers' and workers' lack knowledge about appropriate accommodation options. The following are recommended to facilitate workplace accommodations of employees who are deaf or hard of hearing: (a) increasing knowledge about accommodation resource information, (b) development of problem-solving training to help workers identify appropriate accommodations, and (c) provide workers with skills in using a "marketing" approach to request on-the-job accommodations.

Introduction

Research has shown that one of the most significant determinants in our perceived status in America is one's job (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Crewe & Zola, 1983; Jahoda, 1982; Nam, Powers, & Glick, 1964). However, a recent Harris poll (Prodigy, 1994) found that two-thirds of American adults with disabilities have no job. Moreover, three of ten adults with disabilities have encountered job discrimination, and 20 percent of this population indicated that they have encountered physical barriers in the workplace that have interfered with effective job performance.

Prior to 1990, federal legislation that stressed nondiscrimination in employment stimulated large employers to recruit, hire and accommodate workers with disabilities (Berkeley Planning Associates, 1982; E.I. DuPont and Nemours Company, 1982). Apparently that rate of increase has not continued, even with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. As reported in the New York Times, the rate of unemployment for working age people with disabilities has changed very little -- down to 31 percent in 1994 from 33 percent in 1986 (Holmes, 1994).

The continued high rate of unemployment certainly has multiple causes. Nonetheless, the role of appropriate job accommodations cannot be ignored (Anderson & Watson, 1995; Greenwood & Johnson, 1985; Mowry & Anderson, 1993). Moreover, availability of accommodations is not sufficient for an accommodation to be provided. One problem often identified with the provision of accommodations is that employers and workers are not aware of the range of accommodations that are available, and how they have been and can be implemented on the job (Scherich, 1994; Scherich & Mowry, 1993). In addition,

employers may be unable either to comprehend what are the difficult communication situations on the job for the employee who is deaf or hard of hearing or to perceive the benefits to their company of providing accommodations (Boone, 1988; Foster, 1987; Gibler, 1995). Therefore, management may, even when providing accommodations, make inappropriate judgements about needed accommodations which waste company resources on devices that go unused (Ward, 1992). Workers who are deaf or hard of hearing are not exempt from this confusion about appropriate accommodations.

Purpose

Although there is a large base of research that examines the accommodation needs of persons who are deaf (Crammatte, 1965; Crammatte, 1987; Foster, 1992; Steffanic, 1993), there is a paucity of research on accommodations for persons who hard of hearing. The research results being reported here is part of a study developed to answer the following questions.

1. What on-the-job situations are considered difficult because of a worker's hearing loss?
2. What accommodations are being requested and used in the workplace?
3. Is there a relationship between the type of job held by worker and type or number of accommodations used?
4. What coping strategies are used in the difficult communication situations?
5. Have accommodation requests been denied?

Method

Survey Participants

A survey was developed to examine the current practices in the provision of on-the-job accommodations. Because very little is known about the workplace needs of employees who are hard of hearing, members of Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc. (SHHH) were asked to participate in this survey. SHHH was selected because, as a self-help organization, its members presumably have access to considerable information concerning coping with hearing loss. Through its journal and conventions, SHHH addresses many issues concerning hearing loss and employment. We believed that SHHH members would be able to identify a broad range of appropriate, useful job accommodations.

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Three hundred-nine SHHH chapters were contacted and each chapter was requested to identify the number of members who were willing to respond to an accommodations questionnaire. The chapter then requested the number of questionnaires to be distributed to their chapter members. Two hundred-one members from 52 chapters agreed to participate and completed the questionnaire. Many SHHH chapters that did not participate declined because of their population demographics, e.g., retirees, nursing home residents.

Survey Format

The questionnaire used forced-choice and open-ended items related to employment and accommodations. Forced-choice items produced frequency data on difficult communication situations in the workplace, general types of accommodation used and rates of denial of accommodation requests. Open-ended questions allowed respondents to describe specific accommodations, how they were used, how they were requested, reasons for denial, alternative coping strategies and alternative accommodations desired. Some respondents wrote additional comments to expand on their answers.

Results

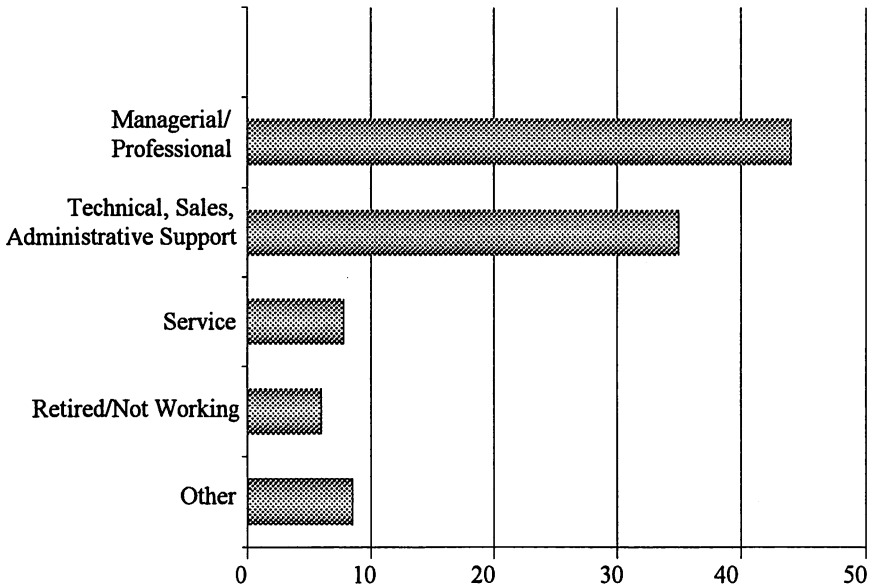
Demographics

Although SHHH is often considered an organization appropriate only for persons who consider themselves hard of hearing, this is not necessarily an accurate perception of the organization. Survey results indicate that many members consider themselves "deaf." Approximately 23% of respondents consider themselves deaf.

Most participants were of working age. Only a small number of retired individuals participated in the survey (n=9). From comments written on the survey, they felt it important to make their experiences known. Other demographic information such as size and sector of company employing respondents and type of jobs held are presented below.

Sixty-five percent of the respondents worked in the private sector and approximately 33% were employed by state, local, or federal entities. The remaining 2% worked in both the private and governmental sector, often as consultants. In addition, the majority of workers who responded work for employers covered under the ADA. For example, almost half of the participants worked for small companies (26 to 250 employees) and only 18% of respondents were employed in companies with 25 or fewer workers.

Figure 1: Percent distribution of employment categories of respondents



Survey participants were employed in primarily "white-" or "pink-collar" positions. The plurality of respondents held managerial/professional positions (44%). The second largest category was technical, sales, and administrative support positions (35%). The remaining respondents held various service, production or manual labor jobs.

Although the range of respondents' occupations was limited, the occupational categories were consistent with McCray's data (1987) on employees most likely to receive accommodations. As McCray noted, the employee who is more highly skilled was more likely to receive accommodations. One might assume that the employer considered the retention of such an employee important enough to provide requested accommodations to assist with difficult communication situations.

What are Considered Difficult Workplace Situations?

As noted earlier, anecdotal literature (Boone, 1988; Foster, 1987; Moore, 1995) indicated that workplace situations which involve groups or are noisy are difficult for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. These work situations have been identified difficult for people who are deaf or hard of hearing due to a

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breakdown in communication capabilities, e.g., receiving instructions, and receiving information in meetings and/or training/in-services. However, many employers and employees view this breakdown in communication efficiency only in terms of a limitation of the person with the hearing loss. Whereas employees and service providers have identified various attitudinal and environmental barriers in the workplace to accommodation implementation. One such barrier is a lack of employer knowledge regarding appropriate accommodations or difficult communication situations.

From a list of workplace situations developed from the literature, respondents were asked to identify which ones were difficult related to their hearing loss. The list included: (a) receiving instructions/supervision, (b) department/staff meetings, (c) inservice/training, (d) performance evaluations, (e) socializing with co-workers, and (f) social functions. Respondents were also asked to identify any other workplace situation that might be a problem for them.

As shown in Figure 2, the most difficult work situations were work-related social functions (77%), department/staff meetings (75%), and inservice or training sessions (68%). There was no significant difference in situations considered difficult for communication by employees' occupation categories. Nonetheless, a greater percentage of respondents in managerial or professional occupations versus technical, sales, or administrative support stated that their hearing loss increased communication difficulties in these situations. Interestingly, only 18 percent of respondents indicated that performance evaluations with their supervisors were difficult related to their hearing loss. This may be because performance evaluations are often conducted one-on-one, in a quiet environment. Thus allowing the individual to use more effectively his or her residual hearing to supplement visual cues.

What Accommodations are Used in the Workplace?

Respondents were asked to "please indicate if you have an accommodation at work in each of the following areas." The areas of accommodations identified were: (a) assistive devices/equipment, (b) support personnel, (c) job restructuring, and (d) other (job accommodations not belonging in previous areas). They were also asked if they were happy with the accommodation and if they desired a different accommodation. Finally, they were asked what they had to do get the accommodation. Results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 2: Percent of Respondents Identifying Particular Workplace Situations as Difficult

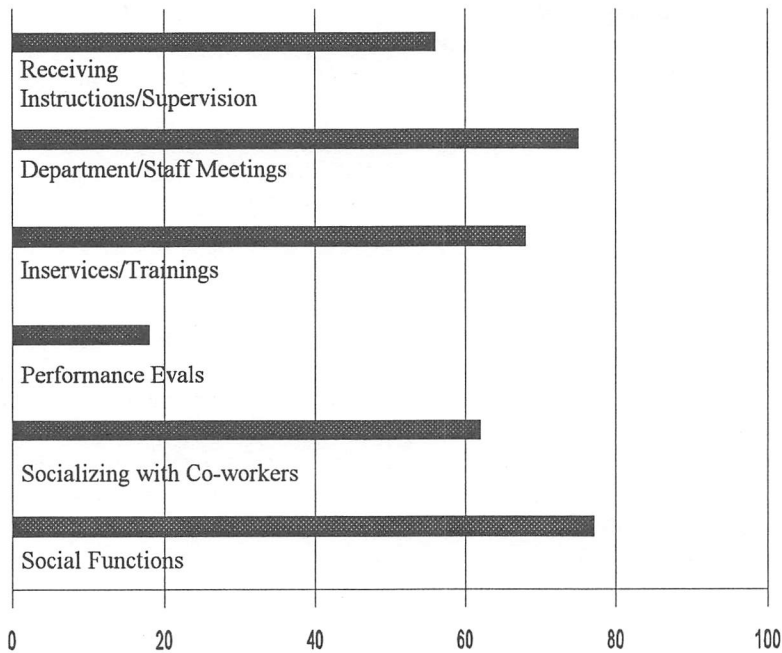
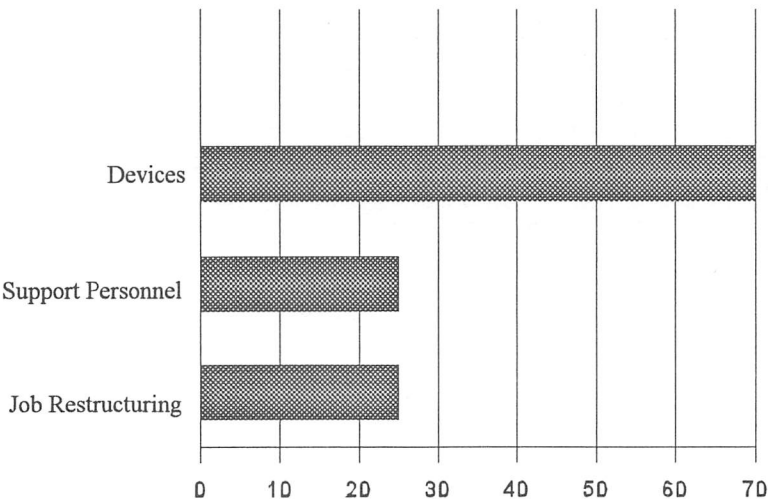


Figure 3: Type of Workplace Accommodations



Workplace Accommodations

The most frequent accommodation category reported in use by survey respondents were assistive devices (70%). The device most often cited was the amplified phone (66%). Other assistive listening devices (ALDs, e.g., FM systems, loops, or infrared systems, most often used in group situations) were cited by only 18 percent of the respondents. Yet the most difficult work-related situations cited by respondents were group or multi-speaker situations.

In addition, there was a significant relationship between the number of devices used in the workplace and the occupations of the respondents ($\chi^2=60.96$, $N=201$, $p<.0001$). Respondents in managerial or professional occupations were more likely to use assistive listening devices or other equipment (e.g., electronic mail, computers) for communication purposes than individuals in technical, sales or administrative support positions.

Other accommodations such as support personnel or job restructuring were identified infrequently. Support personnel was mentioned as a used accommodation in their workplace by only 25 percent of respondents. Typically support personnel were co-workers, i.e., a secretary or other co-worker who provided assistance with the phone or notetaking. Support personnel as an accommodation was handled more on an informal rather than formal basis. That is, the respondent worked out the arrangement based on a personal or professional relationship rather than as a formally agreed on procedure. For example, one respondent noted: "Everyone helps me. They all know what I need and take notes, poke me, rephrase in all situations ... so I don't feel the need for a specific person to help me."

The respondents were also asked if job restructuring was an identified accommodation in their workplace. Job restructuring as described in the ADA includes elimination of nonessential job functions, redelegation of assignments, exchange of assignments, or redesigning of procedures. It was mentioned by only 25 percent of survey respondents, and the most frequently cited job restructuring accommodation was redelegation of assignments, typically telephone work.

In their written comments concerning accommodations used, some respondents indicated that they relied on personal coping strategies to handle many difficult communication situations. Respondents described various coping responses involving a change in the speaker's behavior: asking the speaker to face him or her, asking the speaker to speak more slowly, loudly, or clearly, and asking the speaker to repeat information. Respondents also made changes in their physical relationship to the speaker such as moving to be closer to the speaker, moving to avoid back lighting, or sitting directly in front of the speaker. On a negative note, some respondents indicated that, at least part of the time, they avoided difficult communication situations. These respondents indicated that they tried not to attend department meetings, training sessions or company social functions, or if they did, they "bluffed."

Lastly, the respondents were asked if their accommodation(s) worked well and if they were happy with the accommodation(s) they presently had. Sixty-two percent of the respondents stated that their present accommodations were not

appropriate or did not meet their needs. Other reasons cited for unhappiness with their present accommodations were inadequacies in the environment (14%) or inadequate awareness by other employees or supervisors (14%). An example of an inadequate environment was a classroom or work area characterized by excessive noise. An example of inadequate awareness was described by one respondent who stated that "having someone handle my phone calls limits my control over the conversation." In addition, 74 percent of respondents stated that they would like to have different accommodations than they were using at the present time. Of interest is that most did not know what accommodation would be better than what they were presently using.

Are Accommodations being Denied?

With the passage of the ADA in 1990, refusal to provide reasonable accommodations for employees should be more difficult. A track record of the value of accommodations exists. For example, the Job Accommodation Network reported a benefit-to-cost-ratio of 15/1 for the provision of accommodations. Kirk and Perlman (1994) found that 51 percent of accommodations cost between \$1-\$500. In spite of this information, most employers consider the dollar cost of an accommodation when providing that accommodation to their employee. For example, both Scherer and McKee (1993) and McCray (1987) noted the employer often considered cost as a factor in the decision to provide an accommodation to the employee with the disability. Furthermore, even when providing accommodations, employers emphasized the need to focus on low-cost accommodations (Scherer & McKee, 1993). Perhaps because of either employer and/or employee lack of knowledge about cost-to-benefit ratio or understanding about accommodation options, a substantial portion of respondents (31%) indicated that they had been denied an accommodation. The two most frequent reasons identified for denial of accommodations were cost (29 %) and the employer's or supervisor's belief that the accommodation was not needed by the employee (18 %). However, the majority did not indicate why an accommodation was denied.

Summary and Recommendations

Summary

Previous researchers have suggested that both the characteristics of the workplace as well as those of the employee can influence provision of on-the-job accommodations (Anderson & Watson, 1995; Mowry & Anderson, 1993). In addition, the cost of accommodations may be considered by the employer as too costly (Calkins, 1992). Finally, the employee may be afraid to request an

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accommodation and, thus, may try to "get by" without an accommodation (Mowry & Anderson, 1993).

The results of our study with this sample of people who are deaf or hard of hearing supported some of these previous findings concerning people who are deaf. Our results are consistent with much of the anecdotal literature indicating that problem situations for people who are deaf or hard of hearing essentially involve group situations, noisy environments and/or situations where face to face discussions may be difficult, i.e., training or inservices, and multi-speaker group meetings (Boone, 1988; Gibler, 1995; Walsh, 1992). Employees who are deaf or hard of hearing experience communication problems often in department/staff meetings, work-related social functions, and inservice or training sessions. The situations identified are important for career maintenance or advancement. Difficulty in these situations may cause misunderstandings that can seriously affect the worker's career maintenance or advancement.

One positive result was that performance evaluations did not often present a communication problem. This result may reflect the specific nature of such evaluations. Being typically a private situation, a performance evaluation is usually conducted in an office, in an environment separate from other employees, and may be accompanied with written materials. Thus, without the presence of environmental noise and other distractions, the employee who is deaf or hard of hearing can more effectively use his or her residual hearing to supplement visual cues.

On a negative note, the results indicated that a limited number and types of accommodations were being used for difficult workplace communication, specifically devices and more specifically amplified telephones. Often job accommodations for workers who are deaf or hard of hearing were focused on the provision of TTYs, interpreters, and amplified phones (Moore, 1995; Scherich & Mowry, 1993). Even though those three accommodations are useful in several aspects of employment, the whole issue of accessibility and full participation in the workplace cannot be addressed by them alone. More seriously, the majority of accommodations identified were most appropriate for one-on-one communication, e.g., amplified phones. Few accommodations were identified or in use to improve situations that involved multiple speakers or group situations. This "Catch-22" is singularly disturbing because the majority of situations identified as difficult by participants were multi-speaker situations.

Furthermore, a frequent "accommodation" used, often with mixed results, for multiple speaker situations was various personal coping techniques such as asking the speaker to look at them or changing their own placement within the environment to maximize receptive communication. Unfortunately, many personal coping techniques cited by respondents definitely did not improve communication. For example, one mentioned coping strategy was simply not to participate in meetings, talk with co-workers, or attend work-related social functions. Ultimately, this strategy is detrimental because many business decisions as well as other information are disseminated formally or informally through social functions or

department/staff meetings. This avoidance can create a multitude of problems for the employee who is "out of the loop," i.e., lacking knowledge about changes in policies, information about company reorganization, or other information useful for one's career.

The data did not clearly indicate reasons why there were so few accommodations currently in use for multiple speaker situations. Several possibilities can be proposed. One reason could be that employees were not knowledgeable about accommodations options. This idea is supported indirectly in two ways. First, a majority of respondents were unhappy with their current accommodations. Yet, when asked to identify a suitable alternative, very few were given. Second, in group situations, respondents frequently relied on "negative" coping skills (e.g., avoidance) to deal with these difficult communication situations. If they knew of an accommodation which would help, it would seem likely they would request it.

A second possibility is that respondents did not know how to ask for the accommodation. However, this did not appear to be a problem for the majority of respondents. Although our data did not indicate how difficult asking was for the respondents, what information they provided, or if they were making the request to the proper individual, survey respondents stated that a simple request was often the most successful method. Even though a simple request was most successful, almost one-third of respondents reported that their requests were denied. This result may indicate that more sophisticated requesting skills are needed in some situations. Cost of multiple speaker accommodations may also be a factor; the most frequent reason cited for denying an accommodation request was cost.

The fact that workers surveyed used a restricted range of accommodations, used negative coping strategies, and were unhappy with accommodations they had is surprising. We expected this group of deaf and hard of hearing respondents to be relatively well-informed, given SHHH's activism and education efforts. The limited knowledge shown by this group makes us wonder what the general population of people who are hard of hearing or deaf may know about effective job accommodations. The more restricted information sources available to the non-member could imply a lack of knowledge.

The relatively high rate of accommodation denial also raises questions concerning the employer's understanding of hearing loss and how accommodations can enhance an employee's productivity. Because the cost of the accommodation was often cited as a reason for denying the accommodation. It is probable that knowledge concerning benefit-to-cost ratio of providing the accommodation was lacking. Finally, the second most frequent reason for denial of an accommodation, the employer's or supervisor's belief that the accommodation was not needed, may suggest the employer's or supervisor's lack of knowledge about the nature of hearing loss and its impact on the employee's productivity.

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Recommendations

The results of this study support two practical recommendations.

1. A need for the development of an easily accessible source of information on effective accommodations. Although there are a number of resources available, they are not accessible to both employee and employer and/or neither is aware of their existence. Often these resources are a "best kept secret." The following resources can provide a wealth of information on accommodations to both workers and employers if they are more accessible to the general public:

- a. University of Arkansas Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing,
- b. Gallaudet University, National Information Center on Deafness,
- c. National Technical Institute Deaf, National Center on Employment of the Deaf,
- d. Job Accommodations Network,
- e. Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc.,
- f. National Association of the Deaf,
- g. ADA Regional Technical Assistance Centers, as well as
- h. state and local vocational rehabilitation or community-based programs.

An accessible information source would be useful for both employee and employer in identifying appropriate accommodations. Information on sources, benefits, cost and so forth could be included. It would need to be available in a variety of formats (e.g., print, computer database) and updated regularly.

2. A need to develop problem-solving training to assist consumers in identifying and requesting appropriate accommodations. Study results indicate that consumers often understand what are the problematic situations, but do not understand what accommodation(s) are appropriate for those situations. Development of problem-solving training to help them identify the specific problem situations and the appropriate accommodations for those situations would hopefully increase the number and type of accommodations in the workplace.

This training would likely be based on a "marketing" approach to requesting appropriate accommodations. Marketing, as opposed to selling, is based on a long-term association between the parties. This approach includes an exchange of benefits that emphasizes the positive aspects of providing an accommodation for both the employer, the worker, and other employees. Such positive aspects would include how it will: (a) save money by providing the accommodations, (b) allow the person with the disability to do a better job, (c) improve productivity, (d) increased dependability, and perhaps (e) benefit other employees.

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